

The Tepee: A portable Home for the Plains Hunters

Long before the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other Plains tribes came to the grasslands, the tepee had been developed by the Indians of the northern forests. They used a pole frame to create the conical shape and then covered the skeleton with birchbark, caribou hides, or other materials.

The Plains Indians adapted this basic structure to their own environment and their own pattern of living. An adjustment in the framework was made to accommodate the strong winds of the region, and buffalo hides, sewn together, became the usual covering.

The tepee was an ideal dwelling for the Plains people. Like the buffalo they hunted, these Indians were constantly on the move. Their dwellings, therefore, had to be readily transportable. A tepee presented no problems. To move it, the ends of two of the tepee supporting poles were lashed to a horse. The other ends dragged along the ground, thus forming a roughly triangular frame, a travois, on which the buffalo covering and the family's other possessions were tied.

At the new campsite, several long poles were bound together near their tops. The poles were then stood up and slanted outward from this center tie to form the outline of a cone. Other poles

were leaned against this framework to strengthen it, and a buffalo-hide covering, usually of 8 to 20 skins, was draped over the skeleton. The covering was joined near the top with wooden lodge pins, as shown below. An opening was left at the very top as a smoke hole; the entrance, with closable flaps, was at the lower part of this seam.

In hot weather, when cooling breezes were wanted, the flaps were left open and the lower part of the tepee

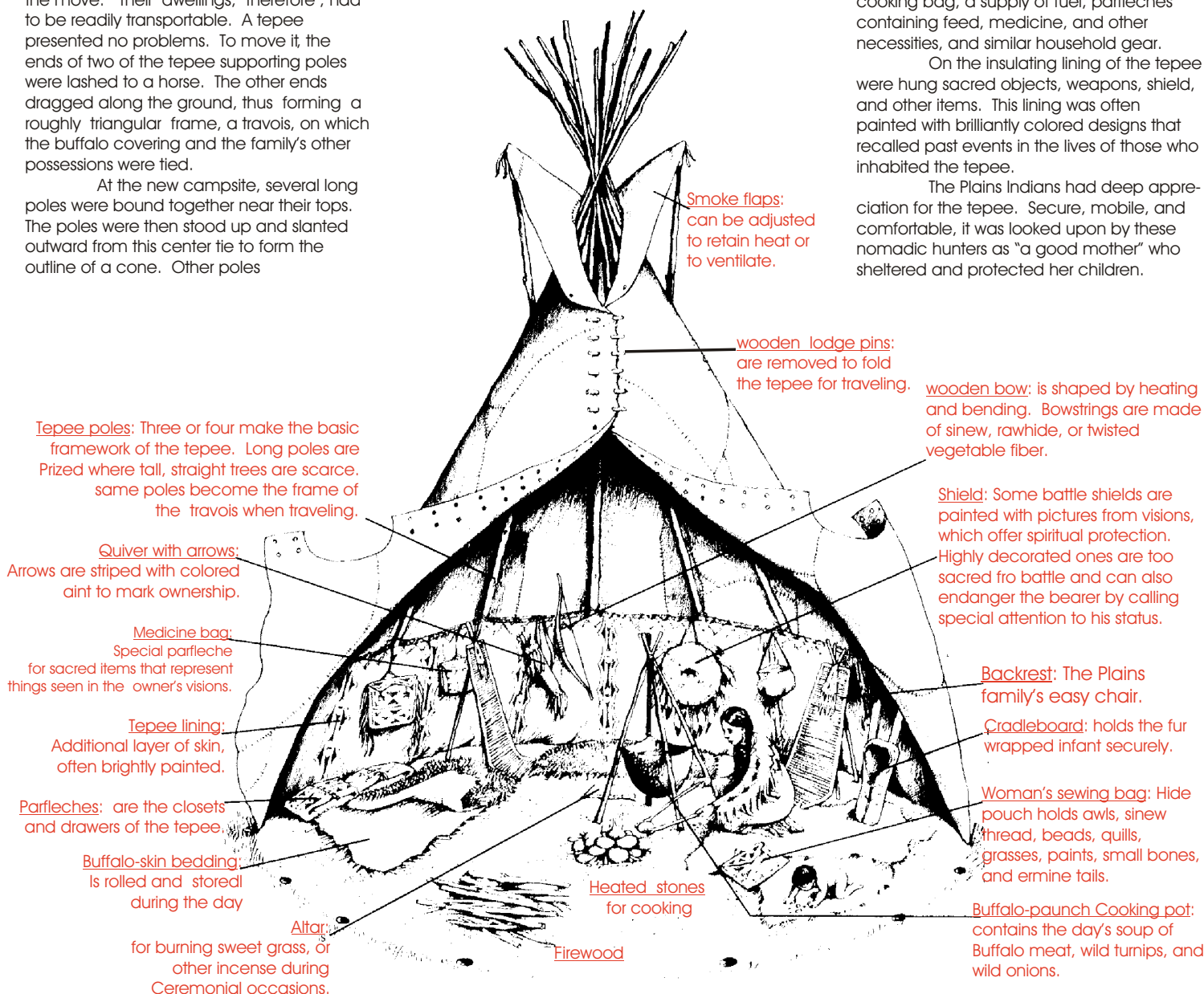
covering was rolled up, permitting the air to circulate freely. In winter an additional skin lining was added to the tepee covering, thus providing insulation. The fire that burned in the center of the floor that kept the tepee warm as well as furnishing heat for cooking.

Because of the strong, prevailing winds that swept across the Plains from the west, a tepee was always set up with the entrance facing east. And the entire shelter was always tilted slightly toward the east to streamline the rear, thus lessening the wind pressure on it.

As shown in the illustration, a typical tepee was crowded with hide bedding, a rug for the baby, willow-rod backrests, cradle board, a suspended cooking bag, a supply of fuel, parfleches containing feed, medicine, and other necessities, and similar household gear.

On the insulating lining of the tepee were hung sacred objects, weapons, shield, and other items. This lining was often painted with brilliantly colored designs that recalled past events in the lives of those who inhabited the tepee.

The Plains Indians had deep appreciation for the tepee. Secure, mobile, and comfortable, it was looked upon by these nomadic hunters as "a good mother" who sheltered and protected her children.



The Tepee or Tipi